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ABSTRACT

In 1984 the State of New York mandated participation in the Comprehensive School Improvement Program (CSIP) for elementary schools that ranked in the bottom 9 percent on statewide student competency exams. To discern the overall effectiveness of the program and identify why it appeared to succeed in some schools and fail in others, the changes in 20 elementary schools required to implement CSIP were compared with those in 23 schools that developed their own improvement programs. Twenty-six teachers, all members of the participating schools' CSIP teams, and 6 building principals were interviewed and asked to complete a written survey instrument. CSIP, as a statewide policy and program, seemed to have minimal positive effect. The research revealed five qualitative factors that seemed to distinguish between improving and nonimproving schools: (1) reduction of teacher isolation; (2) consensual decision-making; (3) broad-based involvement; (4) building-wide intervention strategies; and (5) formal monitoring programs. Implications of the findings, such as the idea that real school improvement cannot be legislated, are discussed. Recommendations for further research are made. (MLF)

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MANDATORY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:

ONE STATE'S ENDEAVOR TO IMPROVE ITS LOWER PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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*The AERA presentation was taken from a Doctoral Dissertation completed at Syracuse University. What follows is the final chapter from that study.

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CHAPTER V

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

Summary

Purpose of the Study

In 1984, the State of New York mandated participation in a structured improvement program for elementary schools that ranked in the bottom nine percent on a prescribed set of statewide student competency exams. More specifically, the State required each of the schools cited in its 1985 Comprehensive Assessment Report --the so-called "CAR schools" -- to develop a "Comprehensive School Improvement Program" (CSIP). The State's recommended CSIP process was intended to serve as a model for participating schools. Technical assistance in implementing the CSIP process was to be provided by personnel serving in five regional offices of what was known as The Effective Schools Consortia Network.

The purpose of this study was to discern the overall effectiveness of the state-mandated CSIP program. A second objective was to identify reasons why CSIP implementation appeared to succeed in some schools and fail in others.

Sample and Procedures

A procedure similar to that of a "Dosage-Response" study was used to compare the changes in 20 elementary (CAR) schools required to implement CSIP, to 23 "COMPARISON schools". This latter group, although rating in the second lowest tier (9 to 18 percent) on statewide exams, was not required to implement CSIP. The CAR (or TREATMENT) group

consisted of non-New York City public schools that the State had identified in 1985 as needing improvement. In the ensuing three years (1985-1988), each CAR school was required to formulate and implement its own CSIP. After the three-year period, each school was to be re-evaluated, and, if improvements were not shown, the school would be re-identified by the State as a problem school.

A series of t-tests of difference between the two groups for each of the four required statewide competency exams was conducted to determine the strength of relationships between the TREATMENT (CAR) group and the COMPARISON group. Six CAR schools were then studied in greater depth, using data gathered via an open-ended survey instrument and on-site interviews. Three of the six schools at which interviews were conducted reported improvements in student test scores following the CSIP. The remaining three showed virtually no improvements following the program.

Twenty-six teachers, all members of the participating schools' CSIP teams, and each of the six building principals, were interviewed. Both focused and open-ended lines of questioning were employed. Following each interview, respondents completed a written survey instrument adapted from one developed and used by Louis and Miles (1990).

Findings

Question No. 1: What was the academic impact of the Comprehensive School Improvement Program (CSIP) on 20 non-New York City elementary schools?

Although the TREATMENT group showed some academic improvement over the course of the three year intervention period, the gains are somewhat illusory when the TREATMENT group is compared to a COMPARISON group of schools that were statistically equivalent, yet ignored by New York State's Comprehensive School Improvement Program mandate. There was no statistically significant difference found in the comparisons between the two groups over the intervention period. As a group, the original low-performing schools that were mandated to participate in CSIP did not improve any more dramatically than the COMPARISON schools that did not go through such a school improvement program.

CSIP, as a statewide policy and program, seemed to have a minimal positive effect on the group of low performing schools required to implement and sustain its prescribed improvement process. Moreover, many of the small gains that were realized over the intervention period seemed to erode over time.

It was also clear from the data analysis that, although the TREATMENT schools as a group showed no significant improvement, there was a large variance within the group. That is, some schools showed considerable success, while others experienced failure. Consideration of the findings from the second research question provide insights regarding possibilities for improving future CSIP efforts.

Question No. 2: What factors and/or processes contributed to the successful school improvement program?

A number of potentially significant themes and issues emerged from the qualitative on-site interview and survey data. Five specific factors were identified as illustrative of the most

important differences between the improved and non-improved schools.

1. Reduction of teacher isolation. Although all teachers communicated a sense of isolation prior to the start of the CSIP, teachers from the improved schools were able to report that such isolation was no longer a factor in their school environments by the end of the CSIP. From the beginning, steps were taken to improve collegial relationships and interactions in those schools.

2. Consensus. Staffs of schools that improved attacked their problems through programs and policies developed in forums characterized by open debate and consensual decision-making. Schools that failed initiated CSIPs with little dialogue, little agreement, and virtually no united effort.

3. Involvement. Administrative leadership in the improved schools consistently sought the opinions, and attempted to mobilize the energies, of all of their school's constituency groups: parents, teachers, students, community-members, and the like. Each group played an important role in helping to foster understanding of a school's problems and in designing possible interventions.

4. A school-wide intervention strategy. Successful schools attempted to improve the academic achievement of all students -- in every curricular area, grade, and ability level. Attention was not focused solely on the few who scored poorly on previous tests.

5. Monitoring. Successful CSIPs used formal monitoring programs to ensure that all teachers implemented the plan appropriately. Without such monitoring, the time and effort spent developing the CSIP were sometimes wasted.

Conclusions

Overall, the New York State Comprehensive School Improvement Program (CSIP) appears to have had little positive effect on the original group of schools identified by the State Education Department as low performing and in need of help. There was no evidence of consistency in the academic growth of students from the targeted schools over the three years in which these schools were to develop and implement the required improvement program. Some schools showed dramatic gains while others seemed to decline further, during the prescribed intervention period.

To be more specific, although both the TREATMENT and the COMPARISON schools improved over the course of the three years that the TREATMENT schools were to implement the CSIP, there was no statistically significant difference found between the groups during the pre-intervention or intervention years for any of the grades or tests studied. Those schools that received the mandatory state intervention program (CSIP) did not improve significantly more than the COMPARISON schools ignored by the program. These findings may be interpreted to be discouraging, given that the TREATMENT group came from those schools performing the least well on a series of statewide exams. They would be the schools that one might have predicted to show the largest gains, since they were "starting out at the bottom."

Unfortunately, however, the findings from this research appear to mirror what is reportedly happening on the national level in school improvement. Mann (1990) cites a recent study

by the National Assessment of Educational Progress which showed that U.S. schools have made no progress in helping students in reading and math since 1971. (Those are the same two testing areas which were the focus of the present study.) Mann blamed the lack of improvement on a "timid tinkering" (p.4) with the concepts of school improvement...an approach that does not work.

It is this issue of timid tinkering that seems to stymie the school improvement process, and which separates successful programs from unsuccessful ones. This study confirms that tinkering via statewide mandatory program participation did not improve the academic achievement of New York State's low performing schools any more than if those schools had been left alone. Chubb (1990), in his exhaustive study of American schools, found that the "bureaucracy is a serious obstacle to effective organization among schools in the public sector" (p. 277). He concluded that "autonomy from bureaucracy is crucial to effective school organization, and effective school organization is the key to superior student achievement" (p.277).

To reiterate this study's primary conclusion, CSIP, as a statewide policy and program, had minimal positive effect on the group of TREATMENT schools identified by the State as its poorest performing schools. Moreover, many of the small gains resulting from CSIP eroded with time. It appeared that the TREATMENT schools could not sustain the improvement effort. Additionally, some results raised the possibility that the CSIP negatively affected third grade TREATMENT school students who previously had scored in high percentiles on statewide exams.

New York State had created a program and policy that emphasized intervention and improvement for those students scoring in the lowest stanines on statewide competency exams. Improvement team members interviewed for this study consistently emphasized the required time and energy dedicated to attempts to push lower performing students above the statewide reference point (SRP) on mandated examinations. Teacher respondents viewed this focus on lower performing students and the SRP as the major goal of both their administration and the state's CSIP model.

For those TREATMENT schools that focused their time and energy on the narrow goal of getting their lower performing students above a pre-determined minimum level of competency, school improvement appeared negligible. The school improvement literature throughout the 1970s and 1980s would have suggested such an outcome, as, according to Rossman et al. (1988), "the quality of life and education in schools seems to suffer when excessive attention is given to any one criteria to the exclusion of others. This is especially true when the criterion is achievement test results" (p.138). In New York State, the tightly focused criterion was that of a "reference point" on a series of statewide competency exams. If students were above that reference point, they were considered competent in that academic area. If students scored below it, they were considered in need of remediation. Teachers reported that their instructional emphasis was required to be directed towards getting students above that reference point.

Thus, in New York State, it was the combination of a top-down intervention and an apparent overemphasis on an

arbitrary reference point on a series of statewide competency exams that seemed to contribute to a "tinkering" with school improvement for lower performing schools. Moreover, the special resources and technical assistance which the State intended to provide through its Effective Schools Consortia Network were of no apparent benefit to the TREATMENT schools that did not improve over the three-year intervention period. It is important to note that half of the survey respondents in this study reported that they were dissatisfied with the quality of assistance given by the state.

Nonetheless, although the Comprehensive School Improvement Program (CSIP) was found to have had little impact on the overall improvement of New York's lower performing schools, an important contribution of the present study resulted from the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from the targeted study sites. This research revealed five qualitative factors which seemed to distinguish improving and non-improving schools. (As discussed previously, those factors center on the reduction of teacher isolation, consensual decision-making, broad-based involvement, building-wide intervention strategies and monitoring of initiatives.) Each of the factors relates to the processes of school improvement efforts rather than to narrow criteria of achievement. Taken together, these factors underscore the dynamic, complex, demanding, and contextually-unique nature of school improvement. It seems clear that school improvement efforts can be successful, when undertaken with a sincere and broad-based commitment to a sustained process geared to consensual problem-solving. In contrast, if focused solely on the

fulfillment of regulatory requirements, or on a narrowly-conceived subset of targeted students, testing criteria, or curricula, the likelihood of improvement appears to be minimized.

It is this attention to the processes of school improvement programs that seems to separate the state of tinkering from that of real improvement. Tinkering seeks a quick answer to school improvement and often incorporates the use of pre-packaged staff development or narrowly focused programs. Such programs may be viewed as relatively easy to follow, and they often provide school administration with a tangible example of "what we are doing to improve our schools". However, they generally fail to adequately emphasize, or understand, that school improvement is developmental and time consuming, demanding considerable effort on the part of administration and staff, and requiring special attention to the unique context of each school.

This focusing on the processes of school improvement is not new. It is a theme which can be found in the literature since the 1960s. The extant school improvement knowledge-base includes studies that warn against the adoption of too narrow a scope or too short-term an approach to improving schools (e.g., Firestone, 1990; Fullan, 1983; Good & Brophy, 1986; Good, Grouws, & Ebmeier, 1983; Louis & Miles, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rossman, et al. 1988).

In summary, then, although this study reveals somewhat of a discouraging portrait of New York's attempt to improve its lower performing (CAR) schools, it also offers some hope for future school improvement efforts. This optimism comes in the

form of the five qualitative process factors identified and discussed previously.

Implications

New York was the first state to mandate that its lower performing schools engage in a comprehensive school improvement program. The underlying premise was that if the lowest performing schools were publicly identified, required to launch a multiyear improvement program, and given appropriate assistance, they would get better. New York's CSIP reflects a rudimentary interpretation of the effective schools literature: that is, if certain correlates are injected into a school, it then will exhibit effectiveness. Such assumptions appear to ignore the large body of research on change. This research underscores the fact that any type of change is complex and difficult. It is a process that takes time and commitment.

Although the CAR identification process did spur some schools to reassess their policies, the results of this study suggest that bureaucratic intervention is a questionable elixir for troubled schools. Not only did the State's program fall short of achieving significant improvements in the academic achievement of low-performing schools, but the CSIP process may have unwittingly had a detrimental impact on higher-achieving students in some of those schools.

One component of the state's strategy, providing assistance in the form of additional personnel and funds, apparently did little more than create another division within

what some consider an already extensive bureaucracy. Assistance promised to CAR schools often never materialized, and, when it did come, its impact was seldom noticeable.

Also, it seems clear that the use of raw-test-score analyses and distributions -- rather than a standard reference point analysis -- would offer the public a more valid profile of student performance in New York State. The State's program of tabulating and scoring tests often provides data, the instructional utility of which is questionable and possibly misleading to the public. Some people may derive the impression that their schools are exceptional or improving dramatically. Analysis of raw score data for students paints a much different picture. After a multiyear, \$15 million effort, aggregate test scores in New York's lowest performing schools improved an average of just 1.1 points per year. This latter view of test score data seems to indicate that New York State's educational programs are not improving.

Another lesson which may be drawn from this study is that real school improvement can not be legislated. Poor student performance and school improvement are local issues that seem to require local responses. However, the State can be of assistance in providing appropriate and accurate data to help schools to assess their performance and problems.

Researchers from two distinct lines of inquiry, school effectiveness (e.g., Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds & Fredrickson, 1979; Rutter et al., 1979; Weber, 1972) and school improvement (e.g., Fullan, 1982; Huberman & Crandall, 1982; Miles & Vandenberghe, 1987; Rossman et al., 1988; Sarason, 1976) have generated a number of lists and factors associated

with the creation of better schools. This study identified five factors important to the successful improvement of low-performing schools. The findings and conclusions of this research underscore the importance of effective leadership and a sustained commitment for improvement by a school's constituency. It is clear that school building principals can play an important role in facilitating the processes identified herein as key factors.

But calls for effective leadership and school-site commitment may reflect just a portion of the changes needed to approach long-term success. Colleges and universities must also develop within their educational leadership degree programs the teaching and learning skills needed to be effective group facilitators and change agents.

And finally, this study also suggests the need for a more decentralized form of school governance. Mandates and regulations from detached state agencies do not necessarily promote effective school interventions that improve troubled schools. School districts and buildings seem to need the freedom to develop appropriate site-based problem-solving that is unique to their environments and communities.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study, both validative and exploratory in nature, investigated a program that was one of the first of its kind in American education -- that of mandating a statewide school improvement program. This area is ripe for additional related

research. Several suggestions for future study follow:

1. Research to confirm or refute this study's conclusions that poorly planned and implemented CSIPs pose detrimental effects to higher academic achieving students.

2. Research to compare the current public reporting system that uses Statewide Reference Point data to one that uses the raw score data on the same population and for the same tests.

3. A factor analysis on the five factors of successful school improvement efforts, to identify levels of important and definitive interactions.

4. Cost effectiveness comparisons of assistance programs developed by state agencies. Such programs could be compared against the impact of providing funds directly to local school districts for improvements.

5. Evaluation of school administrator preparation programs, to see if candidates are being taught the skills and competencies necessary to lead and develop effective educational environments in today's society.